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DOES HOLT FOLLOW FREUD?

HOLT'S recent volume, *The Freudian Wish and its Place in Ethics*, offers several points of interest. In the first place it shows that there is at least one psychologist in this country who, having had no first-hand acquaintance with Freud, yet has the courage to treat of Freud's place in a general system of psychology. In America there has been a Freudian cult—a shrine of worshipers made up of a few who have sat at Freud's or Jung's feet for some weeks or months. Returning to this country, these individuals have made it plain that the principles of Freud are not open to discussion by less favored mortals. Many of us have ventured to believe that even a mere psychologist can understand the essential nature of the Freudian mechanisms and that he can give them their place in the whole scheme of psychology. But we have been handicapped in our efforts to reach this goal by the lack of open discussion in our psychological journals. And the journals have been closed because no psychologist hitherto has had the courage—in the absence of hospital experience—to run the chance of non-profitable criticism at the hands of the favored few. This small band which has set itself up as the true exponent of Freud has done more to retard the broad understanding of that investigator than has the rather unfortunate way in which he himself has couched many of his illuminating principles. Holt's book will go far both towards breaking down the narrow and bigoted method of discussing Freud's theories and towards undermining the evil influence which his too particular adherents have exerted in this country.

Holt's praise of Freud is certainly unduly extravagant. After suggesting that Freud's contribution to science is epoch-making, he says: ". . . He has given to the science of mind a 'causal category'; or to put it less academically, he has given us a key to the explanation of mind. It is the first key which psychology has ever had which fitted, and moreover I believe it is the only one which psychology will ever need." The remaining part of the review will attempt to give Holt's justification of such praise.

Freud's key to the mind is called the "wish."¹ It is this wish which according to Holt transforms the principal doctrine of psychology and recasts the science, much as the atomic theory and later the ionic theory have reshaped earlier conceptions of chemistry. "This so-called 'wish' becomes the *unit of psychology, replacing the older unit commonly called 'sensation'* (italics mine); which latter, it is to be noted, was a *content* of consciousness unit, whereas the 'wish' is a dynamic affair" (p. 47).

Holt, in the chapter on the physiology of the wish tries—not wholly successfully—to come to closer quarters with the wish. He comes out with a conception of the wish which is wholly acceptable to a behavior psychology, but it is not Freud's wish. The wish Freud deals with is never defined, whether in psychological or biological terms. In certain places in Freud one gets the notion that he might be willing to see the wish expressed in terms of the reflex or in habit terminology, yet one must finally arrive at the conclusion that Freud never had any particular interest in working the wish out biologically or connecting it up with the well-known principles of habit formation. The wish remains for Freud a kind of mystical entity—a kind of disembodied ghost which arises to terrify the possessor, not once or twice, but continually. The non-biological or mystical nature of the wish has been even more clearly expressed in the writings of the colleagues of Freud. For example, in Jung's recent book on the unconscious the libido has become a kind of psychic energy—the amount of which in a given individual remains fairly constant, since if there is a lack of libido in one department of life, there is a too great supply (compensation) elsewhere. The wish becomes here little less than an *entelechy*—undisguised by even the thinnest biological raiment.

To bring the wish into agreement with a reflex or objective psychology has seemingly been Holt's chief undertaking, but yet he fails sadly in certain places in remaining objective. Disregarding some of the terminology which belongs to the realistic movement, he talks in general the language understood by the behaviorist. For him the wish includes whatever would be called an impulse, tendency, or attitude. "An exact definition of the 'wish' is that it is a *course of action* which some mechanism of the body is *set* to carry out, whether it actually does so or does not"² (pp. 3 ff.). In the chapter on the Physiology of Wishes he takes up the reflex arc con-

¹ Of Holt's facile and easygoing presentation of Freud's general theory I shall say little. The first chapter might serve as a good introduction to Freud and one safe enough to put in the hands of even elementary students.

² If the "wish" is the *key* to psychology and this is a definition of the wish I fail to see why the key has not been in the hands of psychologists since the time of William James.

cepts and lays the basis for his later discussion of the way "wishes" affect conduct. His criticism of the Meynert scheme and subsequent rewriting of it gives the closest approach to the central part of Holt's book. I quote him in some detail: "An interesting problem of a partially conflicting sensory pattern is 'the Meynert scheme' of the child and the candle-flame, which has become generally familiar owing to its having been quoted by James (*The Principles of Psychology*, Vol. I, pp. 24-7). Meynert aims to show by a diagram how a child learns not to put his finger into a candle-flame. Two original reflexes are assumed: one in which the visual image of the candle causes the child's finger to go out to touch the flame; the other in which the painful heat on the finger causes the child's arm to be withdrawn. A fanciful series of nerve-paths, fabricated in the interests of the 'association theory,' purports to show why after once burning himself the child will in future put out his hand, on seeing a candle, but draw it back again *before* he burns himself. The explanation is beautifully accomplished by begging the whole question; that is, by resting the 'explanation' on certain time (and strength) relations between the two reflexes of extension and retraction—relations which neither diagram nor text accounts for. In fact, apart from the passage in which the whole question is begged, both diagram and text show that on every subsequent occasion the child will infallibly put out his hand, burn it, and then withdraw it, just as he had done the first time; for the reflex path for extending the hand is the shorter and the better established of the two, and it remains entirely vague as to how the impulse to withdraw shall arrive in time to save the hand.

"But Meynert's explanation is not only unsuccessful, it is wrong in its intent. If achieved, it would show that a child once burned will on merely seeing a candle, and before it feels the candle's heat, draw back its hand. And this, Meynert thinks, is the process of learning. Whereas in fact a child that shrinks on merely *seeing* a candle has not *learned* anything; it has acquired a morbid fear. So far from being a step in learning, such a reaction will gravely impede the child in acquiring the use of this innocent utensil. It is true that one severe experience of being burned can establish the morbid cringing at the mere sight of fire, but every teacher knows how disastrous this is to a child's progress; and the mechanism of such a response will not be found in any such figment of the imagination as that which Meynert adduces. I know of nothing in this 'Meynert scheme' that tallies with fact, and, as James well says, it is 'a mere scheme' and 'anything but clear in detail.' Nothing but the authority of the association theory ever loaned it plausibility."

The understanding of Holt's amended scheme is really essential

to his system of psychology and to his later applications to the problems in ethics, and yet it is just here that I must complain of "reviewer's dullness" or else lack of clearness of expression on Holt's part. Holt's solution of Meynert's problem is stated as follows: "The normal process of learning to deal with a candle is the process of establishing a response to an object which is both luminous and hot, if we consider only the two properties so far brought in question. The successful response will be one which is controlled directly by the actual properties of the candle, for this alone means precision and nicety in handling it. The normal child learns the properties of objects, without acquiring a fear of these properties; for fear is *not* 'wholesome.' The case in hand is simple. The child has in fact the two original tendencies, to put out its hand to touch any pretty, bright object, and to draw back its hand when the nerves of pain are stimulated. But these are at first not coordinated; and coordination (learning) is the establishment of a just balance between the openness of the two paths; where 'just' means proportioned to the actual properties of the candle. On first seeing a candle the child puts out its hand; the second reaction (of withdrawal) is touched off by stimulation of the heat-pain nerves in the hand, and the moment at which this will happen depends on the sensitiveness of the heat-pain end-organs, and the openness of the path connecting them with the muscles that retract the arm; of which probably the openness of path is the modifiable factor. The warmth of the candle begins to stimulate this retraction reflex, and stimulates it more, and at an increasing rate of increase, as the hand approaches the candle. All this is needed to save the child from burning its hand, and this is what Meynert's scheme aims to explain, is an openness of the retraction reflex path sufficient to stop the hand before it actually reaches the flame. If the act of extension excited through the eye is not too impetuous, the retraction reflex will from the outset protect the hand; but if the former is a very open path, the advancing arm may get a momentum which the retraction reflex will not be sufficiently quick and strong to counterbalance in time to save the hand from being burned. A few repetitions of the experience will give this retraction an openness which will safeguard the hand for the future; and this process is aided by the prolonged pain yielded by a burn, which continues the retraction stimulus for a considerable period and so 'wears' down the retraction path more than a great many merely momentary stimuli could do. In this way a single experience of burning is often sufficient for all time. Thus experience establishes a balance between the two opposed reflexes, of extension and of pain avoidance, such that the organism carries on its further examination of the candle in safety."

Possibly these two quotations do not sufficiently present Holt's argument. I fail to see even in his more extensive presentation an improvement of Meynert's scheme. Meynert's scheme certainly begs the question, but so does Holt's. If Meynert's scheme demands neural association, so does Holt's. Holt tries to minimize the amount of neural association involved by saying a "few repetitions of the experience will give the retraction path an openness which will safeguard the hand for the future. . . ."³ But this attempt to minimize the associational factors reminds one somewhat of the classical attempt to minimize moral delinquency by pointing to the small size of the baby. In these few experiences a genuine *learning process* is involved and the explanation of this learning process—regardless of whether the act is acquired in few or many trials—is what I consider one of the chief problems in psychology. Holt makes no problem of it at all. The problems which the reviewer and others have treated under the heading "fixation of arcs in habit" would thus seem to have small place in Holt's system.

In Holt's application of his opposed impulse theory to the field of ethics, he has been somewhat too abrupt. It is hard for the reviewer to see that there are many situations in the life of the child which are on a par with the candle. The baby has to form literally hundreds of thousands of such simple reactions to objects. As I look over them I fail to see how one per cent. of the situations in a baby's life square with the one described by Holt as the general one. I for one feel that Holt should have taken several less spectacular situations in the very early life of the child⁴—and some which offer a bit more resistance to his argument. Accepting Holt's argument at its face value, let us see how he makes his rather ingenious applications in the field of ethics. "An innate tendency or purpose of an infant is to put out its hand to touch fire. If the mother is by, she

³ I wish here to enter a partial factual objection to Holt's arguments. In the case of two young children I observed, the candle training, given, to be sure, at widely separated intervals, required many separate tests, although the experiment was made complete in the sense that the candle was allowed to remain present until retraction occurred. I can see nothing in the baby's learning to react to a candle which differentiates that act from any other process of learning.

⁴ In the later stages of development he has more or less made good this omission. "Thus, just as the leaves of certain plants, which are subject to the two impulses of facing the sunlight but also of avoiding desiccating heat, will spread themselves out broadly toward the sun in the morning and afternoon, but in the heat of noonday will partially fold up, so under the teacher's eye the pugnacious impulse of the small boy is subdued to the furtive expedient of the spit-ball; and so too, the man who yearns for worldly power but yet in *personal* contact with his fellows is unconquerably timid will become a renowned inventor, or a shrewd manipulator of stock-markets, or in politics will work into some important position '*behind the throne.*'" (See also pp. 115 ff.)

holds back the hand (*her* purpose) before it reaches the flame. There is a hint for the child, here, of right and wrong. If the mother guards the child unremittingly, and every time restrains the hand before the uncomfortable warmth begins to stimulate the child's own tendency to withdraw, the child will never be burned and may eventually (in a way to be described) acquire the habit of stopping short before reaching the flame. But this cautious conduct will not be guided by (be a function of) the heat of the flame, for the child has had no experience of this. The child's general conduct toward fire will then be partly a function of the immediate properties of fire (its color, position, shape, etc.); but partly also of a something else (really its mother), which may or may not figure explicitly in the child's field of consciousness. The mother has set a barrier between the child and a portion of reality; and forever after the child will be in some measure impeded in its dealings with fire. An inhibition of which the source of sanction is thus not intrinsic is precisely, I suppose, a tabu.

"Or again, if an equally unremitting mother lets the child put out its hand towards the flame and takes care only that the hand by too great momentum or an accidental lurch does not actually come into the flame, the child will not be burned and its own mechanism of withdrawal will be exercised not through the mother's interference but through the direct action of the flame's heat. The child's conduct toward fire becomes integrated, and is solely a function of the actual properties of fire. Ten years later you shall hear the first mother shouting, 'Bobbie, don't you dare put your hand so near the lamp, and if you touch those matches again your father will whip you.' And the second mother will be saying, 'Bobbie, go get the matches now and light the lamp, and set it down on the center-table.'"

I can not enter here into an analysis of his really brilliant chapter on the Wish in Ethics. Although I am not struck by the cogency of Holt's logic, I nevertheless feel impelled to say that this chapter is the first real contribution I have ever seen towards a functional ethics. Surely in future studies of ethics we can have less of Kant and the history of philosophy in general and a more genuine grappling with the real practical situations which lie at the heart of ethical conduct. I am tempted here to justify the title of this review by modifying a famous Whistler saying—"Holt has written an interesting chapter on ethics, but 'why lug in' Freud?" Ere this chapter is reached Freud's views have become submerged in Holt's.

That which interests me in Holt's book more than anything else is his behavioristic tendency. At one time I am ready to say "Holt is a genuine and consistent objectivist," as for example in his description (pp. 85 ff.) of the man purchasing the railway ticket:

“On seeing the man purchase a ticket at the railway station, we felt that there was more behind this action, ‘thoughts’ that were the invisible secret of his movements. Suppose, instead, we inquire whether the more is not ahead. More is to come; let us watch the man further. He enters the train, which carries him to a city. There he proceeds to an office, on the door of which we read ‘Real Estate.’ Several other men are in this office; a document is produced; our man takes a sum of money from his pocket and gives it to one of the other men, and this man with some of the others signs the document. This they give to our man, and with it a bunch of keys. All shake hands, and the man we are watching departs. He goes to a railway station and takes another train, which carries him to the town where we first saw him. He walks through several streets, stops before an empty house, takes out his bunch of keys, and makes his way into the house. Not long afterwards several vans drive up in front, and the men outside proceed to take household furniture off the vans and into the house. Our man inside indicates where each piece is to be placed. He later gives the men from the vans money.

“All this we get by observing what the man does, and without in any way appealing to the ‘secret’ thoughts of the man. If we wish to know more of what he is doing we have only to observe him more. Suppose, however, that we had appealed to his inner thoughts to discover the ‘secret’ of his movements, when we first saw him buying a ticket at the railway station. We approach him and say, ‘Sir, I am a philosopher and extremely anxious to know what you are doing, and of course I can not learn that unless you will tell me what you are thinking.’ ‘Thinking?’ he may reply, if he condones our guileless impertinence, ‘Why, I am thinking that it is a plaguey hot day, and I wish I had made my morning bath five degrees colder, and drunk less of that hot-wash that my wife calls instant coffee.’ ‘Was that all?’ ‘Yes, that was all until I counted my change; and then I heard the train whistle.—Here it is. Good-by! And good luck to your philosophy!’”⁵

No behaviorist could give a better description of the situation than this. But yet in many other places in the book Holt finds it impossible to rid himself of subjective terminology. Indeed, his slipping over from one form of expression to the other is quite noticeable all through the book. An objectivist of my own type feels tempted in reading Holt’s book to give him just a little push here and there to make him cross the line a little more squarely.⁶

⁵ His objective tendency is again uppermost (pp. 125–30), where he ably describes in words wholly acceptable to the behaviorist the mechanism of suppression, dissociation, discrimination.

⁶ Possibly it might be well to point out a few such places. He says (p. 16):

One may be disappointed in not finding anywhere in Holt's book a detailed statement of how he can substitute the unit concept "wish" for the introspectionist unit concept sensation. The reason for the omission is clear. When a unit changes in a science the problems and points of interest shift. Holt as a behaviorist has no interest in making the substitutions because his problems do not demand it. He is interested in conduct and, in the present book, in the ethical side of conduct. Nevertheless, I hope that at some future time Holt will do this and show how the conception of the wish as a unit differs in essential particulars from the reflex arc concept which the behaviorists had previously adopted. In a recent number of the *Scientific Monthly* I have tried in a popular way to rewrite the essentials of Freud's theory in terms of behavior. From the psychiatric standpoint it seems to me that the functional conceptions which Adolf Meyer has employed are nearer to Holt's point of view than Freud's very indeterminate concept of the wish.

One might get the impression, and with some justice, from Holt's book that exact experimentation along lines other than those marked off by Freud are at least quite secondary, but the mere fact that Holt has not given any closer contact with the mechanism of habit formation shows quite clearly that the scientific understanding of the *modus operandi* of even the disemboweled wish (*i. e.*, of the wish reduced to motor set or attitude) must await the working out of just those factors which the behaviorists insist upon.

I think it only fair to say that I have reviewed only those parts of Holt's book which particularly interest me. I can whole-heartedly say—before the author says it for me—that any one interested in the book as a unit or system must read the whole volume!

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"The 'still small voice' is the popular, but just designation for the protest of the semi-dormant upper self when, in reverie, fancy, or imagination, lower impulses have succeeded in intruding on the field of consciousness." Again (p. 31), in describing one of Freud's books, one feels that Holt is almost "orthodox." "Of course he had unconsciously written 'calligraphy' instead of 'chirography'" (p. 32). "But habit and other preconscious motives exercise specific influence as well" (p. 33). On page 45 I again fail to grasp Holt's use of subconscious. He uses it three times on this page without quotation marks and apparently seriously. It is needless to go through the book in this way, but I can not resist the following quotations which come in after his description of the gentleman purchasing real estate: "Not that there are not actual thoughts, but tradition has turned thought into a myth by utterly misconceiving it and locating it in the wrong place." "Thought is often a mere irrelevance, a surface embroidery on action" (p. 87). Of course the book is only a sketch and it is unfair to criticize the author too severely, but he leaves me confused because in many places he uses thought, subconscious, etc., in quotation marks, while in others he apparently uses them as would the structuralist.